

Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

Mary Perry, Michael Gottfried, Kiarah Young, Cecelia Colchico, Kathy Lee, and Hedy Chang

Acknowledging the importance of students simply being in school, California has made student attendance part of its accountability system. This brief covers a session in which it was pointed out that using chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure is new and its underlying causes are not well understood. Even as many schools face the expectation that they take action to address high rates of absenteeism, myths about school attendance persist. The brief includes examples of local efforts to improve student attendance and discusses steps needed to build the capacity of schools and communities to get kids to school and keep them there.



California's new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.



Everyone who's spent time in schools knows that getting kids to school is the first thing.

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism data were displayed on the California School Dashboard for the first time in December 2018. The data, which are part of the state's accountability system, were used to identify schools and districts in need of differentiated assistance.

A PACE analysis¹ of grades K-8 shows that 12.3 percent of California school districts were identified as being "in the red" based on both the high percentage of students who were absent as well as the significant increases in absenteeism from the prior year. Among schools, 11.8 percent of schools are "in the red." African American students, homeless and foster youth had the most concerning levels of absenteeism. There was variation based on the location, with the rates in towns being most concerning. The analysis also showed considerable overlap between those facing absenteeism challenges and those performing at low levels on other state accountability measures, particularly school climate. The implication is that chronic absenteeism is tightly related to other aspects of school operations and to the challenges schools face.

The mechanisms put into place with the State System of Support make this a matter of immediate concern. Schools and districts identified as having high rates of chronic absenteeism will be expected to implement strategies aimed at improving student attendance.

On February 1, 2019, PACE's annual conference, "Putting Evidence Into Action to Advance Equity in California," brought together policymakers, educators, researchers, and interested citizens to build on the *Getting Down to Facts II* research released in 2018. With the rigorous and comprehensive research as a shared evidence base, participants discussed the future of PK-12 education policy in California.

This brief focuses on a conference session titled "Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism." The panelists included an academic researcher presenting findings from newly available attendance data, students and a district official providing information about local efforts to improve student attendance, and the director of a national organization discussing recommendations for strengthening local capacity to address chronic absenteeism.

Myths about school attendance

Michael Gottfried presented information from a newly published book entitled *Absent From School: Understanding and Addressing Student Absenteeism*. The book, a collaboration by authors from throughout the country, describes how new data provide a much clearer picture of the way students progress through school and the effects of missing school on their education and life outcomes. The data show that as many as 7.5 million children in the country miss at least one month of school and that absenteeism has a negative effect on many student outcomes.

Like California, 36 other states have included chronic absenteeism as an indicator in their accountability systems. The decision to hold schools accountable for chronic absenteeism, Gottfried said, rests on a set of assumptions, including that:

- states and districts can develop robust systems for accurately tracking student attendance;
- the measures used to assess schools are fair; and
- states, districts, and schools can affect student absenteeism in ways that are scalable and replicable.


Gottfried cautioned that those assumptions might not come to fruition. He described five existing myths that he and his co-authors believe could reduce the value and validity of chronic absenteeism as a measure of educational progress.

Myth #1 – Concerns about missing school are new.

In fact, these concerns were present early in the days of American public education. Attendance is not a new topic but it has been renewed because we now have such strong data for measuring it, a systematic approach for that measurement, and a federal emphasis on it.

Myth #2 – Measuring absences is straightforward.

In fact, there is incredible variation in measurement practices. Attendance seems binary, a student is in school or he is not. But the measures that states use treat parent-authorized absences differently, along with things like absences due to illness. Similarly, the benchmark for defining "chronic absenteeism" as 10 percent of the school year, or a specific number of days, may not be the right threshold or approach.



Myth #3 – The biggest problem is teens ditching. The bigger issue is that a large number of the youngest students miss a huge amount of school. It is really common at lower grades, particularly from preschool to first grade, and the patterns tend to persist as students get older.

Myth #4 – Schools can easily reduce absences. Many factors associated with absenteeism are actually beyond the ability of schools alone to address. Factors such as student health, mobility, and disability are very complex and inter-related. Also, schools face limited resources. We expect there will be demands for new programs to increase attendance, but knowing how to do this is neither easy nor necessarily sustainable and replicable across settings.

Myth #5 – Parents know absences are bad. Actually, parents underestimate the seriousness of absenteeism, and this is exacerbated in low-income families. Research has focused on who is absent but so far sheds little light on the causes or what strategies might help improve things.

"Focusing on attendance has enormous potential at a relatively low cost," Gottfried concluded, "but that should not blind Californians to the immense challenges involved in improving attendance rates."

Students and the Be Here Campaign, Sacramento City Schools

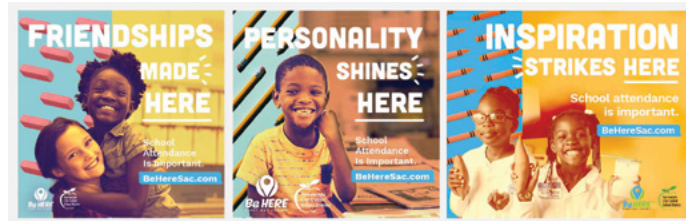
The Be Here Campaign is a student-led initiative to improve attendance in the Sacramento City Unified School District. Students Cecelia Colchico and Kiarah Young presented information about the program. Source Media Agency, a youth-led marketing agency founded in 2017, runs the campaign.

The Be Here Campaign works with several departments within the school district, including the attendance office, youth development, and student support services to decrease chronic absenteeism. They received a three-year grant to work on three main campaign components:

- a youth-led marketing campaign about school attendance, targeting both parents and students;
- district-wide attendance practices and the development of a district toolkit; and
- an attendance improvement program at specific school sites.

The messages included in the marketing campaign, such as the images shown, were developed by the students. "We know what attracts youth and is going to engage them to actually listen," Kiarah said. "We want students to

feel like schools are safe spaces and places where they're comfortable. We want them to know that they can come to school and be themselves while they're learning."



Along with the district-wide messaging, the campaign takes its message to the schools with the highest absence rates by holding rallies that are designed to get students excited about going to school. The group has developed partnerships with local professional sports teams and other community organizations to get help with these events. For example, at a high school rally the campaign was coordinated with the Sacramento Kings and had some of the dancers from the team come to the rally. The group has put on rallies at high schools and elementary schools, and the students presented data about how the levels of chronic absenteeism have decreased in these schools.

Through its work, the Be Here Campaign is helping the district identify what prevents students from attending school and develop strategies to address those causes. Young noted that issues such as transportation to school and the need to take care of younger siblings are barriers that they are trying to help students address—that includes giving students a place at school where they can talk about those issues and find reasonable solutions.

The Be Here Campaign is looking to expand its reach and experiences to other school districts. They run their entire campaign for Sacramento City Schools on social media and encourage others to connect with them. They particularly recommended looking for BeHereSac on Instagram.

Corona-Norco USD – On the Road to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

The Corona-Norco Unified School District operates 50 schools and serves about 53,000 students in Riverside County. District students are 52 percent Latinx, 40 percent white, and 45 percent low income. With a 5.8 percent chronic absenteeism rate, the school district received a "yellow" on the California School Dashboard. That rate, however, compares very favorably with a statewide chronic absenteeism rate of 11 percent. The

district has been addressing the issue for many years and attendance is a specific area of emphasis for Kathy Lee, who is the coordinator of student services.

Lee explained that Corona-Norco's strategies for reducing chronic absences fall under the three broad categories of communication, education, and disruption.

The district's **communication** efforts include setting up a variety of 100 percent attendance challenges and communicating those to families in order to raise awareness about attendance. They target specific dates such as the Friday before a long weekend and seasonal perceived barriers such as reminding parents that even though it's raining children should not miss school.

The district engages its 2,200 classroom teachers in the effort through campaigns such as "We are all here Wednesdays." Every teacher has a sign that boasts about 100 percent attendance and is encouraged to put the sign out on any Wednesday they achieve that goal. The slogan "Fewer than 4 to learn more" provides a tangible attendance goal and reminds parents that attendance supports learning.

They track "attendance events" and notify parents if student absences reach a specific threshold in terms of the number of days missed. The district also makes sure the information is consistently reported for students at every grade level.

Under the category of **education**, early outreach to preschool parents stresses the importance of attendance. They coordinate this with the local Head Start programs and the YMCA, where families take their children for preschool. They also teach parents how to monitor their child's attendance through the district's parent portal. Parents can participate in parenting education classes, at two different grade levels, where topics include structure and supervision around such things as bedtimes and getting to school on time in the morning.

When children are preparing to enter kindergarten, parents and children attend a five-week Little Scholars program that gives the children an early introduction to school and explains to parents the importance of attendance, among other things.

"Communication and education are wonderful strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism," Lee said, "but we also know that we have many families that come to us who are dealing with really serious challenges such as homelessness and illness. We need to address those challenges as well."

The district takes action to **disrupt**, when they can, those conditions that make it difficult for families to get their children to school. To do so, particularly given resource constraints, Corona-Norco USD contracts with an outside company that deploys social workers, family counselors, and similar professionals. Lee explained:

We connect families with these support resources with the goal of increasing student attendance and reducing serious incidents that affect families. What we know is that when students experience adverse childhood experiences and the more of those experiences they have the more it's going to impact their behavior and school attendance.

Subgroup data on chronic absenteeism, now provided through the CA School Dashboard, help the district identify what groups of students have the highest absenteeism rates. Lee said that students with disabilities are a particular concern, as are foster youth and English learners. For each group of students, the district employs different strategies and works with the staff who support those students. They also look at site-level data and identify the schools doing well that can share their best practices and those that need support in order to create specific plans. One school, identified with the highest chronic absenteeism rate, is receiving concentrated attention and going through an improvement science process that the district hopes will inform its attendance work more broadly.

Improving Attendance at Scale in California: Challenges and Opportunities

Attendance Works, under the leadership of Executive Director Hedy Chang, has been at the forefront of a national movement to define and measure chronic absenteeism, and to identify the common barriers that keep children from attending school. Attendance Works has found that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families, and community partners work together to monitor data, promote good attendance, and address those barriers. Chang describes Attendance Works as a "virtual organization with a giveaway strategy" that provides a wealth of free resources available on its website (attendanceworks.org).

"A data driven, systemic approach is what works to move people out of chronic absence," said Chang. "The five key ingredients include shared accountability, actionable data, capacity-building, positive engagement, and strategic partnerships. We now have accountability in place and increasingly have actionable data."

“ If teachers think their only job is to take attendance, not to welcome and engage kids, we’re in deep trouble. How can you tell kids to get to school when the message they get from the teacher when they walk in the classroom is ‘get out of school because I don’t really care about you.’ ”

HEDY CHANG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ATTENDANCE WORKS

It took 9 years to get attendance data into the state’s student data system, CALPADs, which has been leveraged to create the Dashboard. In addition, today most district have local data systems that can provide actionable data. Those changes have come in the last three years, but Chang underscored the fact that it is just a starting part.

“We have not yet built the capacity to ensure that everyone uses that actionable data to support positive engagement and problem-solving to make school a place you want to be, as opposed to blaming students and families.”

A key step is to know what is causing chronic absences. The factors include:

- Barriers outside of school, ranging from illness and lack of health care to poor transportation to involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.
- Negative school experiences whether they stem from academic struggles, bullying, behavior issues, or something else.
- Lack of engagement because of such issues as shortcomings in instruction, an unwelcoming school climate, teacher absenteeism, or other conditions.
- Misconceptions about the importance of attendance and how absences affect learning.

Chang emphasized the need to build the capacity of teams at the school site level to first develop strategies around the prevention of chronic absence. All staff, but particularly teachers, need to see themselves as part of the attendance equation. Monitoring data makes it possible to understand which groups of students are affected, then school staff need to use the data to examine the root causes of chronic absence. For those students at greatest risk, early intervention comes next and, finally, specialized supports are needed, including a coordinated response with other public agencies if necessary.

Currently, Chang said, California’s truancy system typically takes a more legalistic approach and focuses on the most severe situations because it only looks at unexcused absences and only takes action after the absences have added up. Often the students identified as habitually truant are also the most chronically absent (missing 20 percent or more of class). School districts

need to address students at more moderate absenteeism levels (missing between 10–20 percent) and account for incremental improvements when they occur for the severely chronically absent. She also emphasized the importance of starting to address attendance early, with the youngest children, in order to support those who are most vulnerable.

Conclusion

By introducing data on chronic absenteeism on the updated California School Dashboard, the state signaled a renewed emphasis on the importance of school attendance. The challenge now lies with schools and districts using these and other forms of data to inform systematic approaches to understanding reasons for absenteeism and improving attendance rates. This session highlighted the rich knowledge and expertise from research, practice, advocacy, and students themselves that schools and districts can draw from as they strive to improve their student attendance rates.

¹ Kevin Gee, Christopher Kim. *Chronic Absence in California: What New Dashboard Data Reveals About School Performance*. Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. February 2019.

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Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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 - Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
 - Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

Related Publications

Michael A. Gottfried & Ethan L. Hutt (Eds.). (2019). *Absent From School: Understanding and Addressing Student Absenteeism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Michael A. Gottfried & Ethan L. Hutt. **Addressing Absenteeism: Lessons for Policy and Practice**. Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. February 2019.

Kevin Gee & Christopher Kim. **Chronic Absence in California: What New Dashboard Data Reveals About School Performance**. Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. February 2019.



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